

Questions and Answers on Secretary Salazar's Proposals to Create a Sustainable National Wild Horse and Burro Program

Question: What is Secretary Salazar announcing today (October 7, 2009) regarding the national wild horse and burro program?

Answer: Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar is proposing a national solution to restore the health of America's wild horse herds and the rangelands that support them by creating a cost-efficient, sustainable management program.

Question: What problems do the Secretary's proposals address?

Answer: In four decades under the Bureau of Land Management's protection, wild horses that were fast disappearing from the American scene have returned to rapid growth. Wild horses and burros have virtually no natural predators and their herd sizes can double about every four years. As a result, the BLM must remove thousands of animals from the range each year to control herd sizes. The agency estimates that nearly 37,000 wild horses and burros (approximately 33,100 horses and 3,800 burros) are roaming on BLM-managed rangelands in 10 Western states. This free-roaming population exceeds by some 10,350 the number that the BLM has determined can exist in balance with other public rangeland resources and uses. The appropriate management level is approximately 26,600.

Question: Why is the Secretary making this proposal at this time?

Answer: The Government Accountability Office recently found the national wild horse and burro program, which is managed by the BLM, an Interior Department agency, to be at a "critical crossroads" because of (1) the BLM's escalating costs of maintaining unadopted wild horses in holding facilities and (2) the agency's limited options in dealing with the problem of unadoptable horses. (In Fiscal Year 2008, it should be noted, the cost of holding and caring for these animals exceeded \$27 million – or three-fourths of that year's enacted funding level of \$36.2 million for the total wild horse and burro program.) The Senate Appropriations Committee, in commenting on the Interior Department's Fiscal Year 2010 budget, noted that wild horse gathering and holding costs "have risen beyond sustainable levels" and directed the BLM to prepare a long-term strategy to get the program on a sustainable footing.

Question: What are the Secretary's specific proposals?

Answer: Focusing on the need for a "truly national solution" to a traditionally Western issue, Salazar is proposing *the designation of a new set of wild horse preserves across the nation, especially on the productive grasslands of the Midwest and East*. Citing limits on forage and water in the West because of persistent drought and wildfire, Salazar said in a letter to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and eight other key members of Congress with jurisdiction over wild horse issues that the lands acquired by the BLM and/or its partners would provide an excellent opportunity to showcase these historic animals while boosting eco-tourism for rural communities. The wild horse herds placed in these preserves would be non-reproducing.

Secretary Salazar is also proposing:

- *Managing the new preserves either directly by the BLM or through cooperative agreements between the BLM and private non-profit organizations or other partners to reduce the agency's off-the-range holding costs.*
- *Showcasing certain herds on public lands in the West that deserve recognition with Secretarial or possibly congressional designations. These designations would highlight the special qualities of America's wild horses while generating eco-tourism for nearby rural communities.*
- *Applying new strategies aimed at balancing wild horse and burro growth rates with public adoption demand, thus minimizing the number of animals that must be removed from the range and placed in expensive holding facilities. This effort would involve slowing population growth rates on Western public rangelands through:*
 - the aggressive use of fertility control;
 - the active management of sex ratios on the range;
 - and perhaps even the introduction of non-reproducing herds in some of the BLM's existing Herd Management Areas in 10 Western states. The new strategies would also include placing more animals into private care by making adoptions more flexible where appropriate.

Question: Does the BLM currently use fertility control to control population growth?

Answer: Yes. The BLM has promoted the development of a safe and effective contraceptive agent for wild horses since 1978. The most promising agent is Porcine Zona Pellucida (PZP), a vaccine that was developed in the 1990s but is not commercially available. The BLM uses PZP under research protocols in collaboration with the Humane Society of the United States and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). PZP is safe for use in horses, but research is still being conducted to determine if it will be effective in reducing annual herd growth rates.

So far more than 2,350 mares have been treated with a two-year form of PZP, which must be administered to mares after they have been captured. Under the Secretary's initiative, the BLM will increase its PZP use and step up efforts to develop longer-acting agents. The goal over time is to reduce the number of horses that need to be removed from the range and the number of unadopted wild horses that go to holding pastures.

Question: How does the BLM propose to manage sex ratios?

Answer: Slowing population growth rates will take more than just fertility control. Another way to help curb population growth is to increase the proportion of males relative to females while holding the total population steady at the appropriate management level of 26,600. Over time wild horse populations produce roughly equal numbers of males and females. This ratio can be carefully adjusted so that there are more males than females. Changing the ratio of males

to females reduces the proportion of females on the range and this reduces the number of foals born each year. In combination with fertility control, adjusting the sex ratio will help slow population growth rates and extend the gather cycle so fewer horses will need to be removed less frequently.

There may be a limited number of Herd Management Areas that could be transitioned to non-reproducing herds made up entirely of geldings (castrated males). This would reduce the number of foals born on the range Westwide. These 100 percent non-reproducing herds would be identified through the BLM's land-use planning process with full public involvement and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) review.

The BLM will closely monitor herd health and dynamics as it takes steps to slow population growth rates, whether through fertility control, adjusting sex ratios, or implementing non-reproducing herd structures.

Question: Does the Secretary's wild horse initiative require authorization and appropriations from Congress to take effect?

Answer: Yes. The Secretary looks forward to discussing his proposals with members of Congress to protect and effectively manage America's "Living Legends." This effort will advance the overall objective of the BLM's wild horse and burro program, which is to ensure that healthy herds of wild horses and burros can thrive on public rangelands in balance with other rangeland resources and uses.

Question: How much would it cost to implement the Secretary's proposals?

Answer: The cost of the BLM's total wild horse and burro program (including money re-directed from other programs) rose from \$39.2 million in Fiscal Year 2007 to more than \$50 million in FY 2009 because of higher holding costs and decreased adoption demand. As long as the number of animals removed from the range each year (to maintain an ecological balance) exceeds the adoption demand, holding costs will continue to increase. By bringing the reproduction and replacement rate of wild horses into closer alignment with the number that can be adopted out each year, the Secretary's proposal would eliminate the need for any additional holding by 2014. While initial costs for implementing the Secretary's proposals would be significant as the BLM acquires preserves and works to achieve sustainable herd levels on public rangelands, overall program costs could begin to decline as early as 2019.

Question: How many wild horses and burros are there in holding?

Answer: Off the range, there are nearly 32,000 other wild horses and burros that are fed and cared for at short-term corrals and long-term pastures. (As of September 14, 2009, there were approximately 9,665 in short-term corrals and 22,180 in long-term pastures.) All wild horses and burros in holding, like those roaming the public rangelands, are protected by the BLM under the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act.

Question: How much are the BLM's holding costs?

Answer: In Fiscal Year 2008, the cost of holding and caring for these wild horses and burros exceeded \$27 million – or three-fourths of the FY 2008 enacted funding level of \$36.2 million for the total wild horse and burro program. In the most recent fiscal year (2009), which ended September 30, holding costs were approximately \$29 million, or about 70 percent of the total 2009 enacted wild horse and burro program budget of \$40.6 million.

Question: Is it true that adoptions of wild horses by the public have declined in recent years?

Answer: Yes. The BLM placed 3,706 animals into private care through adoption in FY 2008 – down from 5,701 in FY 2005. Secretary Salazar’s proposal to reduce the breeding populations of wild horses should have a positive impact on adoptions because as the public becomes aware that the supply is limited, demand for mustangs is expected to grow. This would affect either the amount of money offered for the animals by adopters or the actual number adopted (the new preserves, it should be noted, would offer horses for adoption). The BLM is working hard to increase the number of adoptions through a number of measures, including its involvement in National Wild Horse Adoption Day, endorsed by Congress and held September 26, 2009. This event was supported by the BLM and key wild horse advocacy and humane groups.

Question: What is the difference between the BLM’s adoption and sales programs?

Answer: After wild horses and burros are removed from the range, the BLM works to place as many animals as possible into private care through adoption or sales. Since 1971, the BLM has placed more than 220,000 mustangs and burros into private ownership through adoption, a process in which a citizen may receive the title of ownership to an animal after one year (with a limit of four titles per year, regardless of the number adopted). Under a December 2004 amendment to the 1971 wild horse law, animals over 10 years old – as well as younger ones that have been passed over for adoption at least three times – are eligible for sale, a transaction in which the title of ownership passes immediately from the Federal government to the buyer. Since that amendment took effect, the BLM has sold more than 3,700 wild horses and burros. Although the December 2004 amendment directs the BLM to sell “without limitation,” the BLM has not been selling any wild horses or burros to slaughterhouses or to “killer buyers.”

Question: Are the Department and the BLM proposing this initiative to make room for more cattle grazing on public rangelands?

Answer: Absolutely not.

The removal of wild horses and burros from public rangelands is carried out to ensure rangeland health, in accordance with land-use plans that are developed in an open, public process. These land-use plans are the means by which the BLM carries out its core mission, which is to manage the land for multiple uses while protecting the land’s resources. Authorized livestock grazing on BLM-managed land has declined by nearly 50 percent since the 1940s; actual livestock grazing on public rangelands is even less than what is authorized because of such factors as drought, wildfire, and climate change impacts.

Question: What is the Administration's position on the use of euthanasia as a method of controlling the number of wild horses maintained in holding facilities?

Answer: Although the 1971 Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act, as amended, directs the "humane destruction" of excess wild horses for which no adoption demand exists, the Administration does not wish to use this controversial authority as a method of controlling or reducing the holding population.